



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE UNCONVENTIONAL GOD

JOHN EDWARDS LEBOSQUET
Fall River, Mass.

Our ideas of God are suffering immeasurably from our conventionalities. The average man, whether in the pews or on the street, is failing to know God because of his crude misconceiving of what knowing God would be. The theologians, meanwhile, should help us here, but they are too busy running with the hounds (with the intellectual and critical, that is) by means of their innumerable reservations and elasticities and tolerances, and at the same time with the unthinking church public, the hares, by their apparent acceptance and support of that public's traditional conceptions.¹ Very many people have the vague idea, for example, that a real communion with God would be a talking back and forth with him, though the fact is that God as a clear-cut and conversationally approachable other-than-ourselves is simply an experience none of us, at least, has, and just to say so now and then would mightily clear the air!

But life is too short for negatives. Let us consider in wholly unconventional and empirical mood certain actual outcroppings in our living which are possibly divine because they all in some sort transfigure living for us.² Several different and

¹ Professor D. C. Mackintosh's *Theology as an Empirical Science* should have made this criticism unnecessary, but unfortunately his philosophizings keep him from that getting at close grips with the concrete presuppositions of theology which one would naturally expect from his book's title. Certain topics, such as sin, salvation, the person of Jesus, and immortality, live up to it in brief and undistinguished fashion, but in his discussions of God he is dealing with definitions and hypotheses, preliminary and otherwise, the total aim of which is rather to justify the conventions handed down than to follow the facts wherever they may lead.

² It is, to the writer's mind, the note of augustness, of illumination, of lifting everything to a higher plane (one throws various figures at the experience, not to describe it but to suggest the inward "feel" of it) which is our most dependable criterion of the divine presence.

not particularly related experiences shall be brought forward: their very variety, it is to be hoped, will serve as a succession of "elevations" adding wholeness and solidity to the idea of God, and in particular pointing the direction in which will lie a more adequate conception of what knowing God is.

Most elementary and fundamental of all there is that negative suggestion of the positive fact of God: the sense of unreality again and again flooding our drabness and monotony. It does not appear often when we are in the thick of our usual everyday occupations; our energetic concentration upon action, adaptation, effectiveness keeps us firmly fixed then in the framework of the ordinary, actual, outer world. It does descend upon us sometimes in the moments between, the moments of margin which supervene beyond that minimum which is immediately absorbed by the sheer necessity of rest. During our pauses, now and again, there has arisen for most of us a misty strangeness compacted of various constituents, partly of wonder at the mere fact of existence—that same wonder which has often been noted as the beginning of philosophical reflection—partly of awe at the complexity of things together with the resulting oppressive consciousness of our own vast ignorance, partly of terror at the dead lift of the task of living upon our shoulders, the task of toiling and pushing—strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield—and bearing, and then approaching, and then arriving at that death with which all have a rendezvous. How pervasive, how universally experienced this sense of unreality is, may be gathered from the widespread phenomenon of pessimism in philosophy and literature; and pessimism is all the more significant in that it is not only found thus in thinkers and poets, but is keenly relished, at times at least, by the great majority of readers. A bare reference to "the weary weight of all this unintelligible world" starts an answering chord resounding in us who yield ourselves to Shakespeare's magic: even the wildly exaggerated gesture contained in his—

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing,

wakens our zestful interest and keen attention, not that we agree with it—at heart surely we do not, else we could not continue the effort living is, soon or late—but we have had in ourselves irruptions of blackness of the same quality as the mood which these words have permanently transfixed.

If one may leap to a contemporary, Mr. Arnold Bennett serves this generation well, not alone by his homely, exquisitely dumpy figures, instinct with common sense and vigor, and by his sure literary touch in general; but most effectively in his sinewy, realistic disclosures of the wonder of living as such, now in quietest gray tones suffused with despair (wonder with a negative sign), as in *The Old Wives' Tale*, now outlining appreciatively the never ceasing unfolding of one's life as it advances in years into things new and strange and amazingly interesting, as in *Clayhanger* and *The Roll-Call*.

Those who seldom stop for thought may regard this which I call the sense of unreality as being tainted with introspection and at bottom decidedly morbid, and so it would be morbid in and of itself as an unrelieved attitude. In most of us who are aware of it, however, it does not exist alone and unmingled, but in and among many other more commonplace ingredients: as a flavor of bitter or sweet tang it should be welcomed, not cried down.

Morbid or not, however, these aspects and moods which have been hinted at are at all events real, that is, really experienced. Their significance does not lie in the fact that they have been scientifically arrived at, by any rigorous casting up of debit and credit, weighing over against each other the pains and the pleasures, the advantages and the disadvantages, the surprises and the ennui of life. Nothing of the kind has been

ordinarily even contemplated: these experiences are made up not of reasonings but of realizings, not of reckonings but of moods; we do not arrive at them, but are immediately aware through them of a something not ourselves and are startled, disquieted; in any case we are rendered self-conscious and unsettled by this otherness looming athwart our neatly arranged garden plots of everyday jog-trot knowing and feeling and willing. The feeling of unreality, of being outside it all while yet breathing and living with it all, is an experience not impossibly of God. Or rather one might put it that there is here an *Ahnung* of God at his shadowiest: not of what he is, but of the fact *that* he is. With that we have something of him: an incipient communion is already in effect.

But to gain any satisfactory suggestions of that to which the foregoing experiences refer, one must look not to such elusiveness any longer, but to another group of positive and exceedingly vivid experiences. It is difficult to label this group in a few words unless use is made of the question-begging expression "God at the throttle," which expression will not do, surely not at this stage of our consideration. What is meant is a familiar enough experience in some form or other; to put it neutrally, there are occasions of sheer effectiveness on our part when what we do is in a sense the result of our minds' or spirits' effort, and yet in another sense—and this from the point of view of our own consciousness—there is about the achieving an inevitableness, a sureness, and hence often a gladness such that we feel rather carried on than carrying on. Even this description is manifestly far from colorless, though the anonymity of the "not ourselves" is resolutely maintained. The trouble is that one cannot be adequate, which is to say accurate, without mentioning and putting in a high light that "otherness" which every experiencer, whatever his theory, finds to be the inescapable differentia of the experience in question.

The most striking type of cases under this rubric is that found in creative geniuses in the broadest denotation of the

term. These men are characteristically humble. It must be granted that their humility is not always in evidence as regards their attitude toward those whom they are prone to call "philistines," the outsider class as such, but they are usually humble in that they will admit and even insist that it is not themselves really who bring to pass their marvelous creations. They may refer to their star or to destiny in the case of generals or empire-builders like Napoleon or Cecil Rhodes, or to a dissuading daimon as it was with the profound thinker-discoverer Socrates. They may cry aloud in desperation with the prophet Jeremiah, "It is a fire within my bones that will not let me go!" The higher "creative" kind of scientist and philosopher calls this otherness "truth" and toils for it and with it in never ending investigation, or in contemplation of the facts, now rearing cloud-capped towers of hypothesis, now razing those elaborations and starting again and again and again. The sense of being buoyed up and carried exultantly on, issues in these quarters not in any sense of aid which the truth as such imparts, but in the keen, glad livingness of the search for the truth. When the savant is well immersed in the concerns of his laboratory or study, it is a fact of his experience that his whole being is suffused with a zestfulness and all-absorbedness so intense, so sublime that it can easily be comprehended why Spinoza—one such creator—termed this and none other "eternal life"! Such a joy in work (to translate the poetic phrase into prose for the sake of clearness) is always vital and inspiring, nay more, all-significant and all-potent—a not-ourselves bearing us, not we it. It is open to the work done with the hands as well as to that done with the head, although alas its appeal seems in this snobbish age to be becoming less and less alluring to the artisans.

It is, however, the artist who is peculiarly and classically the channel of an effectiveness his own, yet not his own. One may describe him as striving and travailing in a poetic frenzy of high effort and hope, and then utterly inert and discouraged and self-loathing; the whole to-and-fro going on

apart from his volition until there appears at last that soul-tearing but joy-bringing birth which was all along the goal. Pregnancy with its restlessness and nerves and selfish irritabilities is one current and very apt figure for the exasperating oddities and yet profound significances of the artistic temperament.¹ There is an external compulsion there, both of that which is to be and of that by which it is (nature) which brings out not inappropriately the artist's experience of communion. There is another figure, however, which more fits our idea and is at the same time no less true to the consciousness of the artist: it is that of a higher authority laying hold of the musician or poet, or whatever he be, and using him as an instrument for its ends. So that the creator's effort needs to be expended not much, not at all as he views it, in the direct bringing forth of his works of art: his whole labor, assuming that he has mature command of his materials and his craftsmanship, consists in the back-breaking, heart-sickening drudgery of getting into the control and swing of that commanding power beyond him and so infinitely greater than he. At the outset of his career he gropes for it, not knowing where it may be or how he is to proffer himself to it, laboring or dreaming, sometimes for years, "to find himself" as it is called: yet this is but a way of speaking, for it is not himself but this other than he—though only to be found within himself—which he is seeking, if haply he may find it.

This striving which is the artist's life-drama has its counterpart in his every working-day. He sits down to his easel, his music score, his typewriter, with the necessity upon him of toiling forth from the average general-human to the exceptional and divine-energizing attitude. To put it in homely but apt phrase, he must crank and crank and crank until the divine fire functions, first snappingly, then smoothly—and he is off on the wings of the wind: no longer pushing at a dead weight, but borne on and on, his effort now being the

¹ See in particular May Sinclair's novel *The Creators*.

different one of directing and steadying the exuberant flight. Such an exertion sounds much easier than the preliminary striving for it, and so it is, in so far as it is stimulating and exhilarating to an extent such that no words can express adequately its infinite attractiveness; but judging by the vitality it takes out of a man and the unremittingness of its demands, it is at the same time incredibly difficult, much more so than the brute muscular (so to speak) drudgery which preceded it. One actually grasps now the true, the beautiful, the ultimate, or rather is grasped by them; and so the free, happy, yet unspeakably strenuous activity goes on, until, perhaps gradually, perhaps in a sudden insistent call, the usual, the material resumes its sway; if nothing else, the physical need of food, recuperation, sleep will drag him off the field of divine action. Loath though he be, he obeys perforce, and must strive and concentrate all over again, upon his return, to win through to the heavenly experience: so that it is hard to say which is the more irksome, to pause when one prefers to go on, or to get moving, drudgingly tugging one's self by one's bootstraps up out of the comfortable, ambling everyday.

So much for the transitional moments, the painful beginnings and breakings-off of artistic energy. The significant fact for our purpose here is that during the artistic activity as such, i.e., during its normal course irrespective of change, the picture the artist is painting, the symphony he is composing, the novel he is writing (and it is the same as regards the truth the thinker is seeking to formulate, or the cause the reformer lives and dies for—not to go into the other Protean forms taken by this divine which we call from this point of view imagination because we know not what else to call it) mounts him and drives him and in every way for the time being wields him, wearing him down and using him for its goals until at the last it allows him (though it keenly protests even then) to break away weak and spent. He will gaze later wonderingly at the work accomplished in those hours of creative experience.

His name is attached to it: he has the credit for it and will sometimes insist all but swaggeringly—human, all-too-human as he then is—upon the praise due him; yet he knows well, deep within, that it is not to him that the glory truly belongs, for the work came not so much *from* him as *through* him! If one may digress for the sake of clearer illustration into theology (though it is not really a digression, for the whole of this discussion, odd though this may sound, is nothing if not theological), what the Gospel according to John sees and states with utter absoluteness, and so far as I can see with utter truth, is this significance we are pondering, the significance of that “other” rather than of one’s self in the productions of creative genius. For example, there is this: “The words that I say unto you I speak not from myself, but the Father abiding in me doeth his works” (John 10:14). It is a strange perversion, one which would be incredible if it were not nearly universal, to regard this and other such expressions as self-exultations rather than, what they so vividly are, disclaimers and the very extreme of humility. In general, for that matter, what our doctrinal statements call the divinity of Christ signified for the writer of the Fourth Gospel—and much more, one must think, for the consciousness of Jesus—not an exaltation of Jesus, but an exaltation of God, whom Jesus was aware of in a way analogous to that of the other creators just now outlined, but with a unique pervasiveness and spiritual range. Let it be freely granted that the argument thus far is being decidedly outrun when one plumps out thus prematurely the word “God”; our excuse is that the illustration from Jesus becomes far clearer if the word is not omitted. That it is God to whom these experiences point, it will be attempted to show in due time. For the present that matter may well be postponed, the more as we are not done as yet with the phenomenology of our subject.

There must surely be mentioned, because conventional religious experience makes so much of it (and an experience is

not necessarily false, as so many seem to think, because it is commonly and conventionally met with), the fact that a striving for a right life individual, social, becomes aware similarly of a something higher, abler, other than the striver as such. "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" is the forthright description of this by one clear-seeing passionate pilgrim of this type. The reader should remark here not the name given to that other, but solely the sheer experience focused in such a description. Not otherwise, though in different connection, the Reformation theologians ascribed the forgiveness of sins (meaning by that what we should put as "the hope of a wholly satisfactory living") not to one's own works, but to the grace of God,¹ "grace abounding" in Bunyan's title.

The Roman Catholics emphasize no less this aspect of the struggle for perfection. It is for them also a "not-ourselves" which co-operates with our effort to redeem life. Among them this matter is realized, for the common man at all events, by being externalized: in that certain specific, outward relations and officially (that is, validly) performed acts—speaking by and large, the sacraments—are proclaimed essential to salvation, the word here meaning virtually satisfactoriness. The mechanical quality of this procedure is not congenial to our prejudices, but it exhibits the more clearly their corporate and age-long developing conviction that it is not in man, himself alone, that walketh to direct his steps—and here again it is important to observe the nature of the conviction rather than to quarrel with its manner of expressing itself.

It need not be said that the ecclesiastical opinions here adduced have been glanced at, not in the slightest degree as dogmatic proofs, but to illustrate the elementary religious perception which prompts them, a religious perception which is met with, with more or less consciousness of it, among most if not all of the morally and spiritually in earnest. The fact

¹ For Martin Luther upon this point see Professor McGiffert's *Protestant Thought before Kant*, pp. 23-27.

is indeed that the sectarians and dogmatists and infallibilists, who (in the Protestant as well as the Roman mode) are vastly numerous in our churches, are prone to exploit in the interest of their peculiar tenets this all but universal religious experience, the experience, that is, of added impetus, of a swing forward which the aspirant, outside as surely as inside the church fold, becomes aware of in his energetic pushing toward deeds worth doing. Undoubtedly this forging on is himself in one sense, and he will, if not theologically biased, be very likely to call it his "better self"; but however it be as to phrasings, there is in men an immediate realization, not as religious dogma but as religious fact, that there is something more august, worthier, abler, more enduring than one's own (usual) personality which must be taken into the reckoning during one's spiritual strivings.

It is, it should certainly be noted, such a spiritual striving in one's self and most of all in society which is the context and basal reason for the most recent and undoubtedly the most familiar idea just now of God: I mean "the striving God" or "the finite God" as he is commonly called. This conception originated, for us at least, in Professor William James who put it forth as a religious corollary to his root-and-branch anathema against absolutism; it was enthusiastically subscribed to by the Pluralists, including the Neo-Realists,¹ by most of the novelists who poach at all upon this region,² and by many of the thinking public, lay and liberal theological. A good case could probably be made out for the thesis that no idea of God but this one would do as theoretical framework for the religious experience here being emphasized; in particular that no all-including, diffuse God could possibly be "other" enough, which means individual enough, to *be* associated with. Whereupon the opposite side would counter, very likely, that a God more than we (which the upholders of a finite God also insist to be true of God) might well be more in that he *includes* us

¹ See Professor Ralph Barton Perry, *The Present Conflict of Ideals*, chap. xxii, "Pluralism and the Finite God." Neo-Realism's "Amen" to it is given on p. 379.

² Mr. H. G. Wells and younger men of his school.

and all men and all else; and the fact that God in the sort of experience in question effectively functions within the experiment or within society, immanently that is, decidedly indicates an Infinite All-Container. So the argument would wax no doubt hotter and hotter. We need not pause upon it, however, for though it would not be irrelevant, it would be lengthy; besides not being in the least necessary, for the only point intended to be made in the reference to the idea of a finite God has been gained already in the mere mention of it: the very existence of the idea bears testimony to religious experience of the sort referred to in this paper.

The hints or illustrations (it is plain that they are no more) thus far brought forward by way of not so much supporting as presenting that religious experience, are far from being exhaustive; no mention has been made, for example, of what might be termed the social increment, meaning the experience that five people working together or even meeting together in any effectual way are considerably more effective from many points of view than that five times the effectiveness of one which would naturally be expected; and so with five hundred, or fifty million,¹ an experience well described if not precisely meant by Jesus' remark, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Furthermore there has been a complete and even conspicuous ignoring of the much which the mystic of all ages and all religions has to tell; this has at all events been overmuch treated already and need not be gone over again. Despite these and other omissions, and despite also, be it said, the inevitable meagerness of outline throughout, it is to be hoped that the angle of consideration intended here is by now somewhat intelligible and that it is, whether one agrees with it or not, at any rate clear what is meant by insisting that though the "Great Companion" is dead in the older sense, he is yet living and communed with in another and equally admissible sense.

¹ Cf. G. Simmel, *American Journal of Sociology*, VIII (1902), 1 ff., 158 ff.

But it is high time to turn from phenomenology to evaluation, from the fixating and denoting of this particular type of experience to the consideration of what or whom men do under such circumstances experience. The word "God" has been used above at more than one juncture, used prematurely, and in strict logic unjustifiably, because of the difficulty and unnaturalness of paraphrases. Can it be demonstrated now that this provisional use of the term was in fact accurate? Can it be proven that that "other," as we usually called him with careful neutrality, is God? The answer to such a direct question would of course have to be "no": God is, as such, we might say, never to be proved, but always to be believed in.

It is at least possible to brush away certain objections to such a belief. It will be said by some, has probably been said often by the reader of the preceding pages, that the experiences described above point not to God but to the subconsciousness. I do not deny that the subconscious is involved in these experiences, but that fact in no sense disproves that the awareness in question is awareness of God. Nothing is more self-evident to the epistemologists of the present than that the channel through which an experience comes cannot as such make the experience an illusory one. In other words, the reality of anything of which we are conscious is not refuted by an analysis of the perceptions concerned in bringing that reality to our consciousness. Shall it be denied us to be as healthily realistic regarding our belief in God as we are, by all theories of knowledge, admonished to be regarding the outer world? Surely the "egocentric predicament" cannot bar our way here, where it is the subconscious ego which enters into the reckoning!

In any case, though much use has been made here of the word "other," otherness is by no means a sole and sufficient criterion of God; for the matter of that, the whole world of outer facts and persons, other though they are, are daily perceived and lived with, with no remotest thought of their being God—I am not including here the incorrigible theoretical

pantheist, of course. The sense of otherness is an essential element in our idea of God, as—again save for certain eccentrics—it is essential to our idea of any reality apart from ourselves; but in the case of God this “not-ourselves” factor is combined with a sense of impalpableness and general elusiveness. In addition to these characteristics, which are at bottom negative, there would have to be certain positive notes, as most obviously that of irresistibleness. I do not use the word “omnipotent” which would seem to some more natural, for I am referring to our feeling in the matter, not asserting objective might.

Even irresistibleness is too inclusive to serve us as a divine criterion, for it may be said of it, and of all the experiences alluded to above, that they might conceivably, even so, evidence an evil power, a “devil” in some form or other. This possibility, so far as anything thus far adverted to is concerned, must be admitted; yet these experiences, as we shall see, have a further precluding note. As for the possibility of a devil being really amongst us, it cannot be denied that there are certain very definite experiences pointing in that direction, not those detailed above but analogous to them: take, for example, the confidence of many a selfish adventurer in “destiny” or in his “star,” as was the case with Napoleon; or there is the gambler relying upon his “luck” or the betting man upon his “hunch”—these all and others like them being not-hoped-for, but, for those concerned, actually experienced enablings. Such a realizing sense of the Evil One is less common, usually however, among his votaries than among his persistent opponents—for the reason probably that evil and selfishness, as one of its many other injurious effects, slowly but surely clouds the vision and clogs the whole perceptive apparatus.

So much for the argument from experience as indicating a Satan as well as a God in the world. It ought to be admitted indeed, more generally than it is, that every argument for the existence of a personal God will, analogously applied, serve equally well to prove the existence of a personal evil urge. So that to object to the reasoning above because it opens the door

to an Evil One is no such *reductio ad absurdum* as at first might appear.

The note just now hinted at, which points to God and at the same time debars the inference to any evil power is the note of moral and spiritual elevation. A true sense of God will be pervaded—and, I submit, the positive experiences adduced in the body of this paper are pervaded—by unselfishness which means on the one hand an utter absence of sensuality and self-interest, and on the other hand, an outgoing and a benevolent interest in the good of all, the whole making for hope and unworried confidence and a gladness, not of an individual and selfish, but of a spiritual sort—"joy," in the religious terminology.

But whatever be the correct theoretical description of its differentia, the sense of God is surely in no danger of becoming confused, on the part of those undergoing the experience, with that of God's opposite. If consequently we take our stand, as we are here doing, upon experience, no further effort need be spent upon the describing of this particular distinction. What is vitally needful is that one should avoid being misled by the smoke screens of conventional description implicit in many words and phrases. Only actual experience ought to be accepted as significant, which means among other things that it is not necessarily those who speak most clearly of communing with God who have experienced him or know anything whatever at first hand about him. There are so many petty minds and erroneous parrot-repeated conceptions abroad among those who say "Lord, Lord!" with unction, not to say gusto. And vice versa, the profession and even the stout assertion of utter ignorance of God (very characteristic as these are of our inverted hypocrisy nowadays) should not in itself lead us to suppose that religious experience is in fact absent. Here, as everywhere else, the true procedure is that of being guided not by appearances or opinions, but solely by the realities in question.